

The Trivium: Subject, Method, Skill

The “Liberal Arts tradition” has its roots in Ancient Greece and perhaps even before that, but one of the earliest writings to mention a liberal education is from the great Sophist, Isocrates, who wrote:

“ . . . men who have received a liberal education from the very first are not to be known by courage, or wealth, or such-like advantages, but are most clearly recognised by their speech, and that this is the surest token which is manifested of the education of each one of us, and that those who make good use of language are not only influential in their own states, but also held in honour among other people.”

Historically the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences have been divided into two groups: the three subjects of the Trivium (Grammar, Logic, Rhetoric), and the four subjects of the Quadrivium (Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, Astronomy). The mark of liberal distinction noted above by Isocrates comes from studying the Trivium, which develops one’s ability to use language, symbol, and thought effectively, and it can be said to comprise the Liberal Arts.

While the Quadrivium holds a place of great distinction in the history of Western civilization, its focus is not upon language, but rather the various manifestations of number, and this general body of knowledge is what we would consider to be the repository of the Liberal Sciences.

The Trivium deals with Mind, the Quadrivium with Matter.

Trivium Skills

Implied within the Trivium subjects is an actual *method* for dealing with symbolic information. Language is in everything we do as humans; it is how we choose to alter reality, to create social structures, to make art, and wage war. It is not just the actual speech acts, or the words themselves, which have importance for us but it is in what we do as a result of those words that demonstrates the true power of language--- what the late 20th Century philosopher Terrence McKenna called “little mouth noises.”

It can be an arduous task to study the Trivium in the 21st century as most people receive an “education” that actually works *against* the mental strengthening of the Trivium

studies. To that problem, the solution seems to be finding ways to introduce the modern student to the Trivium without them becoming overwhelmed, overly-bored, or lost. With that view in mind it became clear that within the three subjects of the Trivium there are also certain skills which aid the student in not only using their mind better, but in engaging with the social reality around them more effectively. Habitual use of the skills helps to develop intellectual “muscle” and gives the person confidence in their ability to think through problems.

What *IS* this?

To ask questions of a thing is to become involved with its essence, to seek its inherent truths, however near or far to that ultimate state of understanding we may come. We ask questions based upon what we know, what we imagine, and what we imagine there is still left to know. One of the skills, certainly, of any well-educated mind is to ask more and better questions, and to continually advance one’s ability to find correct answers. Through our thinking and questioning we engage in the pursuit of going from understanding less to understanding more.

What’s more? What’s further? That dynamic duo of questions will lead any person to seek beyond the veil of what they encounter. Sometimes things are exactly as they seem, and our further questioning can reveal this. Other times, we encounter a potential “onion” of information, with each layer being *occulted*, or hidden, by the layers before it, and which require some peeling away until you can arrive at the core of truth. That kind of questioning led to the realization that the skills developed in the first three liberal arts can be emphasized at the beginning of one’s Trivium studies to give the student some upfront advantage in learning the ropes of the Trivium system and making it work for them.

Is liberal education *cool*?

There are certainly many different interpretations of just what comprises a liberal, or classical, education and just as certainly many of these interpretations are not favorable or in any way within the accepted realm of style today. The study of Latin Grammar, the reading of Plato and Aristotle, Catholic nuns, old white men with faces grimaced from years of stooping over Worlds of Words while a World of Action lay outside. . .

I’m still a beginning student of the Arts myself, but I know that at first had I not followed my *intuition* that the Trivium was worth looking into, I would have stopped at my preconceived ideas of what this type of education is for, or even *who* it is for. It just seemed really old-fashioned and irrelevant to today’s modern society. Thankfully, I followed my intuition and have seen the potential for the Trivium in modern society, if only we can find a way to re-envision it and see what of it is useful to us today.

The point of this article is to give you, the student, the means to quickly start making use of this system and to learn it well enough that it becomes a part of your background mental processes. You should NOT become more boring as a result of studying these Arts! As the system becomes more deeply embedded into your conscious and subconscious mind, you will start to see how universal this type of education really is, as well as being able to judge its strengths and weaknesses better. A liberal education is not the only kind of education we require as human beings, but it is the best kind of education for the exercise of the intellectual mind, as well as for honing the skills of communication and the general ability to understand. Give yourself one year of working with these materials (as the study shapes and reforms neural pathways, better connecting the various lobes of the brain) and you will achieve results beyond your expectations.

Some Techniques

There are many skills one could identify in the Trivium, some of which may not even be clear to the author, but the ones here identified are sufficient to give the student an edge when learning. The skills are:

1. Distinguishing Qualities in Material
2. Taking Notes
3. Defining Terms
4. The Paraphrase
5. Finding the Argument
6. Mental Concentration & Memorization

Just those six mental processes alone are enough to provide someone with enhanced ways of thinking. When understood and used repeatedly in our everyday lives, these skills eventually become an integrated part of our normal life of thought, leading us to seek for what is more, what is further. While these skills are covered in more detail in the presentation *How To Read A Book (An Intro To Liberal Learning)*, they will be described very briefly here. The *How To Read A Book* presentation uses clips from Mortimer Adler's DVD of the same name. *What he identified as essential skills for reading applies to verbal situations also, and to learning in general.*

Distinguishing Materials

Adler makes three distinctions in reading: reading for information, entertainment, or for *understanding*. To read for information or entertainment requires a different skill set than to read for understanding. In fact, little skill is required for informational reading such as an auto repair manual, or the "light" reading done before bed to help us doze off to sleep. To read for understanding, on the other hand, is a task which requires higher level skills that can be developed through practice, but have to first be made conscious.

“We seek in our reading to go from a state of understanding less, to understanding more.”

Taking Notes

Taking notes seems like a no-brainer, but it is often an overlooked and underdeveloped habit. While normal conversations are no place for a note pad, books, lectures, and formal discussions are. Becoming skilled in taking notes of a verbal presentation of some kind is extremely valuable, as the live setting may elicit many different thoughts and feelings inside of you making it harder to remember some specific details you may have wanted to remember. To take notes actually inside of the book you’re reading is, in a sense, an act of dominion or ownership of the ideas within. Taking notes helps improve our memory and recall of the text, but also to help us develop an intellectual understanding of the book as a whole, and in parts. In the liberal method, we read the book through a first time to simply become familiar with the general scheme, then successive readings utilize our notes as guides when seeking to understanding the various parts that *make up* the book.

Defining Terms

Many authors use common words, such as love, to convey many different ideas or meanings, and the reader must be *aware* of this possibility and seek to know what definition of a term is being used. The same applies in conversation where two people talking about love may each have completely different definitions, and unless they both agree on a single definition, they can’t possibly ever be talking about the same thing!

Imagine two men who meet and decide to go fishing together. Well, one guy’s definition of fishing is very *serious*. He gathers all of his well-organized tackle boxes, a few choice rod setups, his waders, and when he gets to the spot he likes to sit and watch the various water and weather conditions for about five minutes before determining the *best* approach. The other guy thinks of fishing and imagines grabbing a cooler full of beer, throwing some tunes on the radio, tossing a couple half sticks of dynamite out into the water and generally partying his ass off while throwing out a few half-hearted casts into the now-disturbed water. As you can imagine, these two gentlemen would be in for quite an experience together and all because they did not have a clue about what the other person was talking about!

Define your Terms!

The Paraphrase

An immediately applicable skill to practice is the Paraphrase. Put simply, the paraphrase works to extract the essential ideas from a given passage and to re-phrase it in new language; or, to say the same thing, but differently. To summarize.

In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin relates his use of the Paraphrase for mental improvement through writing:

“About this time I met with an odd volume of the Spectator. It was the third. I had never before seen any of them. I bought it, read it over and over, and was much delighted with it. I thought the writing excellent, and wished, if possible, to imitate it. With this view I took some of the papers, and, making short hints of the sentiment in each sentence, laid them by a few days, and then, without looking at the book, try'd to compleat the papers again, by expressing each hinted sentiment at length, and as fully as it had been expressed before, in any suitable words that should come to hand. Then I compared my Spectator with the original, discovered some of my faults, and corrected them. But I found I wanted a stock of words, or a readiness in recollecting and using them, which I thought I should have acquired before that time if I had gone on making verses; since the continual occasion for words of the same import, but of different length, to suit the measure, or of different sound for the rhyme, would have laid me under a constant necessity of searching for variety, and also have tended to fix that variety in my mind, and make me master of it. Therefore I took some of the tales and turned them into verse; and, after a time, when I had pretty well forgotten the prose, turned them back again. I also sometimes jumbled my collections of hints into confusion, and after some weeks endeavored to reduce them into the best order, before I began to form the full sentences and compleat the paper. This was to teach me method in the arrangement of thoughts. By comparing my work afterwards with the original, I discovered many faults and amended them; but I sometimes had the pleasure of fancying that, in certain particulars of small import, I had been lucky enough to improve the method or the language, and this encouraged me to think I might possibly in time come to be a tolerable English writer, of which I was extremely ambitious.”

For this skill, *much personal ingenuity can be applied with good result*. For example, simply take a conversation you had recently, or a chapter from a book, and attempt to “put it” in one sentence. After doing that, apply the same ideas to be put into three sentences. Such simple exercises produce noticeable results. Look for other situations to try this in, and also look for ways in which others use this skill.

Any time you are having trouble understanding something, summarize it and try and give a concrete example of the basic concept. If you’re talking to someone and don’t understand them, paraphrase what you understand them to be saying and ask if it matches their intention. This may help us often in situations where emotions can entangle us in conversations that become more complicated than. The Paraphrase also helps with the next skill, *Finding The Argument*.

Finding the Argument

Whether listening to someone talk or reading a book, the main questions we must have are, “What is this person saying?” and, “Is it true?” In a nutshell, that is what we mean by Finding the Argument.

An argument in the liberal tradition is not a shouting match, as the term is used to mean nowadays. When talking with someone, or rather while listening, the person presents their “argument” which is what they want to persuade you of as being true. We listen and evaluate and then may have a counter-argument or some shade of agreement. What is being discussed are ideas, although many find themselves succumbing to the intoxication of emotional response and tend to commit the Ad Hominem fallacy by choosing to attack the person and not the argument. We must avoid this at all costs.

A strong argument will be deductive and follow very clearly from established premises to a valid conclusion, but not all arguments are able to do so and require finesse, honesty, and sound thinking to communicate. If we’re not seeking to deceive and are interested in the truth then we do not present our arguments as our best thinking on the issue and we must seek honest feedback and criticism.

When reading a book or listening to someone talk, the most important task is to come to an understanding of the message being conveyed. There is no option for the two-way conversation to occur, so what you have is the case of the author putting the argument down into words and you taking your time with it, studying it, understanding what it says, and by this way you begin to have a sort of “conversation” with the ideas themselves. You test the argument for validity and find where you have agreements and disagreements, you determine what the author’s argument is and see how well they made the case.

Sometimes an author seeks to be subtle or clever and so will make the reader work hard to discover the true argument. Other times a speaker may seek to be very clear and unambiguous, leaving the audience with a definite understanding of their ideas. Seeking definitions, discovering key sentences which together comprise the logic of an argument, and utilizing the paraphrase are all a part of “finding the argument.” Finding the argument also gives some indications to us as writers, guiding us to make sure we understand our own arguments and that we’ve presented them in ways desirable to our tastes and goals.

When one has come to the point where it can be truthfully said, “I understand,” then and only then can one truly criticize or critique a presentation, whether written or verbal.

Mental Concentration/Memorization

Mental concentration is a skill required above all others. If you cannot maintain focus on the information presented to you, there is little hope of ever coming to any understanding or of obtaining any value from a presentation of any kind. Mental concentration is a simple skill, yet one that is often very difficult to do well for very long. But there is hope--- anyone can do it! In his lecture, *The Liberating Arts*, Rev. Edmund Opitz talks about the simplest method of attaining to mental concentration, and also improved memory:

“I first encountered this approach years ago in a pamphlet by the eminent British novelist, Arnold Bennett; it was entitled “How to Live on Twenty Four Hours a Day.” You can make your own life more exciting and fulfilling, wrote Bennett in the breezy manner of a novelist, if you resolve to learn some subject, any topic of your own choosing—like political economy—and make a pact with yourself to spend 90 minutes three evenings a week in intense study. This does not mean merely sitting down with a book in front of you, which is all you’ll be able to do at first. You’ll start to read, and after a few pages your mind will be miles away. Grab your mind and drag it back by the scruff of the neck! says Bennett, and gradually your mind will realize that you are in charge and that you mean business. At this point your mind will start to pay attention and do what you demand of it.

Another way to teach your mind that you are in charge of it is to spend a few minutes before retiring rehearsing the events of the day, hour by hour: what you saw, heard and did, whom you met, what you said, and so on. Once your mind realizes that it will be called upon to recite at the day’s end, it will begin to pay attention during the day; you’ll experience things more vividly and thus recall them more readily.”

The ancients had many techniques for memorization which amaze many modern people simply because of the amount of information that the mind is capable of storing! An entire Rhetorical Canon is devoted to this skill, *Memoria*, and more can be found out about it in Francis Yates’ book, *The Lost Art of Memory*.

The Trivium Method

Simply having the *skills* of the Trivium is enough to improve your intellectual ability, but combining them with the *method* implied in the Trivium brings the student to an even higher level of attainment, allowing you to learn ANY subject.

KEY

Grammar → Logic → Rhetoric

Input → Processing → Output

Absorb → Organize → Communicate

Knowledge → Understanding → Wisdom

Simply put, the Trivium method is the metaphorical usage of the *Trivium subjects* (Grammar, Logic, Rhetoric) to process information. A basic analogy is that of a computer which takes in information, and this is the Input or Grammar stage.

Then, the computer makes sense of the data, putting 1's and 0's in the right places, organizing the information correctly, and this is the Processing or Logic stage.

Then the computer performs some function based upon the results of the Processing stage, it communicates the understanding obtained, and this is called the Output, or Rhetoric, stage.

For an example, you press the letters "K-E-Y" on your computer keyboard (Input), the computer makes sense of the incoming data stream (Processing), and then the computer displays the word "KEY" on your screen (Output).

Grammar

(Answers the question of the *Who*, *What*, *Where*, and the *When* of a subject.)

The Grammar stage is where you always begin. *Familiarity* and *Repetition* are keys to this stage. As you are only seeking to become familiar with the general territory of a body of knowledge, intimate details are not yet necessary but rather a broad view is sought out.

Antero Alli calls this stage “Absorption” in his book, *Angel Tech*. Get the big picture first and then move towards particulars. Repetition helps to ingrain new knowledge into the mind which helps the mind to make sense of the information faster, so by absorbing as much as you can about the subject the more “stuff” you have to work with and organize, make sense of--- OR ---the better one “knows” something, the better one can “understand” it.

In this stage it is crucial to define terms and recognize form in *presentation*, the basic outline or structure of the information or *argument*.

Logic

(Answers the *Why* of a subject.)

In the Logic stage, all of the information you absorbed in the Grammar stage is now checked for consistency, and deeper patterns are sought and recognized. Does all of the information agree with one another, or are there contradictions? Through the Logic stage, we come to know what something is by eliminating contradictions and “making sense” of the information.

Rhetoric

(Provides the *How* of a subject.)

Rhetoric is where our understanding of a subject is then put into our own words as we move the information from the mental to the verbal. To fully attain the Rhetoric stage is similar to learning a subject in such a way so as to teach it, not simply to know or understand it. Rhetoric deals with the application of Knowledge and Understanding into ever-changing forms of Wisdom.

An Example: Star Dust & Sushi

Astrophysics and Japanese Cuisine are subjects of a completely different kind. Firstly, astrophysics is an extremely complicated subject which requires many years of intense study to begin fully grasping. Japanese cuisine, while many chefs make their life's work of it, is something seemingly much more attainable than astrophysics is.

No one in their right mind would argue that astrophysics is as approachable a subject as Japanese cuisine, right? Well, with the Trivium method, such an argument can easily be made.

The basic fact is that *the Trivium method works the same way every time, for every subject you study, always*. You must first start with the elementary principles of a subject: unique terms, techniques, etc. Every subject has its own field of research available, with its own implications, but essentially, the way in which each subject is learned and integrated is the same!

The only true difference between astrophysics and Japanese cuisine, *when the Trivium method is applied*, is the amount of work required to reach the stage of Understanding and Wisdom. The steps are the same. You will master the ways of slicing sushi long before you'll understand the implications of star dust and the growth of planets, but in both cases you will use the same moves, the same skills will be utilized, and in both cases you will be seeking to understand something well enough to teach it.

Most of your time will be spent in the Grammar and Logic stages, as Rhetoric can be applied fruitfully only after some Understanding has been gained. It is said to, "Seek Wisdom and the rest shall follow," which, in this context, would mean to seek the ability to represent the given subject in your own style, and the entire endeavor will fall into place--- simply because the steps that lead to Wisdom never change!

Even a few years of astrophysics study will probably not make you ready to teach it, but you WILL be able to hold a high-level conversation on some detail of the subject with a learned professor or teacher in the field. Having SOME Understanding always leads you to SOME Wisdom. The more work you do in the Grammar and Logic stages, the better your work will be in the Rhetoric stage.

Marshall McLuhan, the author famous for such aphorisms as, "The medium is the message," said that the Trivium can be thought of as a three-headed Siamese twin; Grammar and Logic forming one half of the twin, Rhetoric the other.

A formulaic way of representing the Trivium method is this:

(*Grammar*--->*Logic*)--->*Rhetoric*

Any quest for Wisdom begins with the Thirst for Truth. Then, as the journey begins, the Trivium method becomes the vessel which leads you safely to that distant shore. In most cases, Ultimate Truth is not attained, but Some Truth is. Some Truth with a bit more Understanding and a little bit of Wisdom leads us to ask more and further questions; *such is the spiraling nature of the Trivium method*. Our seeking after Truth is what inspires us to utilize the method of the Arts, the lost tools of learning, the vehicle of Wisdom.

The Work

Developing the mind in this way is not always easy, but it isn't grueling. In fact, you are very likely to find yourself becoming excited by your experiences in learning. The motivation to test your limits and push boundaries is encouraged in this tradition. At first the mind may still seem sluggish or "dark" even after working with some of this material for a few weeks--- ***Keep going!*** Eventually you will begin to have Aha! moments of varying degree, illuminations will occur in the mind which will excite you as you gain access to deeper levels of your awareness.

For many of us, the ***first year*** of liberal study may simply work to repair the damage done to us by the indoctrination into mediocrity known as *schooling*. This is a good thing, we have to start where we're at. We have some free time in our week that we can devote to such studies, and this kind of activity uplifts us. To become better persons, citizens, beings, we must engage in activities of higher and higher quality. The Trivium deals largely with the education of the mind, the intellect, although it can have some bearing on the education of the character, the personality, the soul, of a person.

A well-functioning mind, with its ease of thought and confidence in seeking, is equipped to handle the ravages of life and to find subtlety in experiences which allow one to appreciate the smallest details, as well as the biggest pictures. It is possible to imagine that one day our species may even see a civilization of wisdom seekers emerge from the shackles of history, with eyes shining, hearts open, and hands set to the tasks required by such Strength, Wisdom, and Beauty.

We have a lot of work to do!